



# THE DOUBTING SPECTATOR IN THE EXPERIENCE OF PRESENCE

*Ruptures of Perception mediated in Time and Space*

A Manual on the Scenography of Ariane Trümper



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Hello?      Are you there?

You know      ...      I can't hear you      .... but I felt the need to ask.

Are you actually still there?

I have to ask ... because you know ...

Neither can I see you!

previous pages: Excerpt from spoken text in *Heat of the Moment* (2013).



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## -PROLOGUE-

This is a work of mine, not only a theoretical/reflective one but in its appearance also a practical/artistic one.

This thesis shall help me and the reader find a common ground. To create a shared vocabulary to discuss my research and my artistic work, and to place it in context with scenographic tendency in contemporary art, theatre and society. It is a manual, providing the reader with a guideline to understand my working process and offering a frame for my artistic practice. This paper is a translation of my art into words. It is a manifesto on what art is, a manifesto that works with perceptions.

This thesis is not to be understood as providing an objective view. I think no paper is able to do so, as it is always written and edited by a subjective person. It is an illustration of the connection between conscious and unconscious decisions, between subjectivity and the supposedly existing objectivity, rather than a traditional research paper. It is an appeal to the importance of emotional factors, also in academic research, which are so often ignored because of their 'unreliability' and difficulty to be measured.

Art is the attempt to communicate on another level that language is unable to. Maybe art is a language of its own, as language is 'only' a translation of what is going on in our heads. Making art is the attempt of trying to find signs or symbols for something we want to express. The communicational level of art seems to be a more unconscious one, a level where feelings and personality come from.

I think that 'good' art should communicate to an audience on different layers, for example emotional, symbolic, rational or conceptual ones. Through different layers a broad public and varying types of spectators can be reached.

We all want to understand the world around us and to share this, but we function differently, some more on emotional, unconscious levels, some more on a rational and conscious one. But what we all have in common is that we want to connect, that is why we communicate. We want to transmit our understanding of the world, but as we all are individuals with an exceptional character do we never totally speak the same 'language.' We are shaped by different environments and experiences and as such cannot be understood apart from them, and even if we often can't grasp the whole environment that shaped us, it will always influence our behaviour.

This is mostly the same with understanding the artist and his works. Even if there is a complex concept behind the art work and its creation, can this maybe not be totally grasped. That is why art should speak to the spectator on another layer, too. And this other layer is the more intuitive, emotional one. Additionally the concept can then enrich the experience of the art with new aspects of 'looking on' and thinking about the work. In case that doesn't happen and the concept is not revealed, intended or not, it still does influence the creative process, which shapes the result and thus will be sensed in the experience of the work.

This is the same about understanding ourselves, even if we can't grasp the whole im-

print on our character, will it always influence us. Art is a mirror of this complexity and should thus combine complex conceptual, rational and especially emotional layers. As in art or in life the goal is communication, to be understood by others and to understand others and their behaviour and motives at least a little bit better.

In this thesis I will try to formulate how and on which basis I am working on creating art that deals with emotions and rationality. How I attempt to reach different kinds of people and hope to be able to enter their reality. I am trying to research what makes us who we are, and what lets us experience how we do. I want to play with what forms our self perception and our perception of our environment. Everybody perceives things and has to interpret them to be able to live. So I ask myself the question:

How can I make the spectators active and aware of their position in space and create an honest interaction between art work and spectator?

And by 'honest,' I mean, not wanting to fool anybody. I don't just want to create an illusion, that is inaccessible and a secret trick, I want to make understandable how illusions work and make graspable that they are also only part of our personal realities, as opinions and misunderstanding. With 'active' and 'aware', I mean a thinking and participating spectator, who makes up his/her own mind and reflects on what

he/she experiences. And an 'interaction' is a dialogue that recognises 'the onlooker' and 'the looked at'.

I'm going to guide the reader through thoughts about present, past, time and space and our perception of them. In 3 exposés, which I call my *grey zones*. They are mainly based on personal observations around perception, as a more artistic part of the text. Relating to them, the 3 essays about: On Spectatorship, On Scenography and On Mediation, which focus on crucial topics about theatre and other arts, which form a base for reaching a variety of people. These chapters are alternating because they are building onto each other. This all is framed by this Prologue and the Epilogue.

With the aim of having given the reader a close look on my roots, on my way of thinking and thus providing him/her with an interpretation code - a manual - to read my art, additional representations and incarnations of my work will then follow.

As I am doing a 'by theory interwoven' practice-based research on art, I shortly want to distinguish the ideas of two theatre makers, who reshaped the theatre world, to explain my idea of what an academic research could be. A research that becomes less abstracted and that stays closer to reality. These ideas can also be seen as a reference to my understanding of art I gave earlier, for the communication and experiences I want to create and for my understanding of how humans are constructed in general.

These two crucial theatre makers of the 20th

century are Antonin Artaud and Bertold Brecht.

On the one hand the spectators shall be totally immersed in a play, Artaud wanted to overwhelm them and shatter their reality with his 'Theatre of Cruelty'. The spectators should become aware of nature instincts, of emotions and brought back to the essence of being. "Theater of Cruelty means a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all. And, on the level of performance, it is not the cruelty we can exercise upon each other by hacking at each other's bodies, (...) but the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all" (Artaud 79). Erika Fischer-Lichte phrases Artaud's intention as follows "It should bring about a 'state of trance' in the spectator and, through direct influence on the subconscious, enable a 'making conscious and taking possession of certain dominant strengths...which direct and guide all"(44).

In contrast to Artaud, Brecht's idea focused on creating a thinking spectator who actively judges the seen. He wanted to make them conscious against the false reality, created by an illusionary theatre stage. The spectators should develop a critical, distant and reflective position towards the seen which should enable them to recognise and see through the falsity in life. Brecht intended to reach this through the 'Verfremdungseffekt' (Alienation effect) of his 'epical theatre.' "To alienate a procedure or a character means initially simply to take the expected, known and clear from the procedure or character and to create

amazement and curiosity about them" (Brecht 101; vol. 23). "The essence of the epic theatre might be, that it not so much appeals to the emotions, but to the rationality of the spectators. The spectator shall not witness but to deal with the seen" (Brecht 186; vol. 1).

To combine these two essential theatre makers is a balancing act between emotional immersion and critical reflection. And even if they seem to have nearly opposite methods do they both aim to create a responsible self thinking spectator. They invite to have a close look on supposed opposites and to find out which potential might lie in their reunion, how they can benefit from each other and what they might have in common.

I don't want to make Brecht and Artaud the main subject and reference of this thesis, in fact they are not. They haven't been my motor and main inspiration during the last two years. But finding out about the relation of my thoughts and ideas to their ideas and theories, gave me a confirmation. Their ideas supported me by acknowledging that my thoughts had already existed for some decades. They gave me the assurance to not feel I have drifted into a too abstracted and too reality unrelated art or personal theory. That is why it is necessary to mention and acknowledge them here.

This paper is a balancing act between artistic practice, observations, personal opinion, and academic knowledge gained from anthropological, sociological, philosophical, psychological and artistic sources, my way of combining practical and theoretical research in art.



## THE 7TH OF FEBRUARY 2014. MY PRESENT AND YOUR PAST.

I am here right now writing to you, with the intention of giving you an impression of my ideas on what we are and how we function.

I judge from my body - my embodied being - and I don't want to claim any universal/objective knowledge, because the existence of such I doubt. I am sitting here in my small garden house on a chair, crossing my legs. My body is constantly perceiving, hearing the rain on the roof, tapping against my window, it focuses on this frame, my point of attention, my laptop, even if around this focus so many other things are to be seen. I feel the weight of my body resting on the chair, I smell the mix of coffee and sleep/morning, but I must admit I had to focus on it, to recognise it at this moment.

My body is constantly perceiving and interpreting the world, as is yours.

Me, the body constantly selecting what I should recognise consciously and what is okay to be left or decided unconsciously. It seems to me that most of our decisions are actually made unconsciously.

But what is deciding then, how does this work, who am I in this and who is this bony, fleshy warm vessel surrounding me?

First of all this vessel is me or as you are reading this, you. I believe the body and mind, as they are often called, are one; one thinking body. But sometimes I still tempt to use vocabulary that describes them as separated, I think my Christian imprint sometimes still shivers through while I try to explain my thoughts. Excuse me for that, but my body was taught this way.

Our whole life our body receives and filters information, it needs to do so, to be able to survive. If we would constantly interpret everything new, we wouldn't be able to even cross a street, we would be confused and lost in an unknown alien world. So the mechanism of 'judging' and

'interpreting' information is necessary, but of course it also bears the danger of prejudices and stubborn minds. Our body somehow needs to trick us, to make us viable, this is neither bad nor good, it's just elementary.

And as it claims to be so all encompassing I get curious and I want to understand it. I want to understand the difficulties of conscious realising our body, because I think we might learn something out of it. I want to work with our ability to reflect on certain decisions we make. I want to understand how we work, to make it easier to understand our decisions we make and maybe sometimes to consciously over think certain choices and emotions.

At this moment while you're reading this page, of this printed paper, I want to share my personal ideas and view on the world with you. Some ideas I can link to other people who wrote down their thoughts, others originate from my own thoughts, even if I'm quite sure somebody has already thought them before. I decided that I want to lay them out to you, because they are the basis of how I work. They are the reason why I build and want you to experience my art works in a certain way. The important material is you, you and your experience. You, a unique subjective body, inseparably bound to its environment are what fascinate me.

"What seems to be just 'there to be seen' is, in fact, rerouted through memory and fantasy, caught up in threads of the unconscious and entangled with the passion" (Bleeker 2).

# ON SPECTATORSHIP

“We always see less than is there.”

“We also always see more than is there. (...) Seeing always involves projections, fantasies, desires and fears, and might be closer to hallucinating than we think” (Bleeker 18).

The audience, the watcher, the viewer, the participant, the translator, the discerning actor, the observer, the seer, the onlooker or the spectator.

So many different names exist that try to define people who participate in a performance. Performance defined as a temporary/live event in the broadest frame of theatre or artistic spectacles.

But what is a spectator? What are his/her characteristics? What is the role of spectators, how important are they? What does it mean to be passive or active as a spectator? Should they be performers? What do I, as an artist, want from them?

A spectator is somebody who decides and is aware of attending a live, temporary event.

The spectator is a person who joins a performance, entering the theatrical spaces as an ‘unknowing one’. The spectators do not know the script and do not know what exactly is going to happen. They only received a certain pool of information, specifically filtered for them. They are moving in an unknown terrain, potentially excited and insecure. If the spectator enters a classical theatre space, a certain security of a well known pattern of ‘how-to-behave’ does exist, meaning sitting down, watching and listening. Maybe the spectators even know the text of the play or the performing company. But if these components or only some parts don’t make sense, they get confused. The secure world starts to tremble when we have to evaluate already stated patterns anew. An insecure spectator is created, but this disorientation can be used to reveal new possibilities and mental points of view of and on the personal reality.

I, as an artist, want to reveal something, to communicate, maybe even to create a dialogue and to transmit a message or just a feeling. I want to reveal something out of the spectator’s world they haven’t recognised so far. Something that exists in reality, but probably was unnoticed by then. Through the characteristic of a life event and through this the ability to create the awareness of the ‘being-here-and-now’, it is possible to confront the spectators with themselves, with the being in this world, with the subjective perception.

Spectatorship was or is often seen as Jacques Rancière describes it in *The Paradox of the Spectator* as “a bad thing” because passive, it’s looking, the opposite of acting and knowing (271).

Or as drawn by Plato: “the theatre is the place, where ignorant people are invited to see suffering people” (by Rancière 272). But is this efficient to only blame the spectators? Doesn’t a certain form of theatre develop a certain kind of spectator? Can we not also find this failure in the theatre makers themselves, who just didn’t address an emancipated spectator? And who declares that looking is a bad thing? It could also be interpreted as observing, thinking and learning!

Whoever’s failure it is, in the post-modern theatre there is a shift of the spectatorship towards the centre of the attention, the spectator might even become the content of a play, experiencing in a specific time and space becomes the performance.

Fischer-Lichte says about the post-modern theatre the following: “the spectators are given back their right to spectate. Postmodern theatre elevates the spectators to absolute masters of the possible semioses without, at the same time, pursuing any other ultimate goal. The spectators are free to associate everything and to extract their own semioses without restriction and at will, or even to refuse to attribute any meaning at all and simply experience the objects presented to them in their concrete be-



ing. Here is understood and taken for granted that looking on is a creative act" (57,58). To this we can just add a confirmation from Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, who says that "The activity of watching has itself become a theme (looking, listening, experiencing, becoming aware of the way an observation comes about), and in addition, and often in connection with it, the subjectivity of the viewer (his/her personal and cultural background, sex, his/her position as an individual within a group or society). It is safe to say that this type of theatre appeals to the viewer in his/her role as a viewer" (2).

These quotes intend an existing wish for an 'active-minded' public. But what does that mean? How can an active mind be created, and does this presume an active body?

Activeness for me means a conscious state of mind, a certain awareness for the own presence in the here and now. To become aware of our own subjective position, in accordance to other subjective positions. Being active includes conscious thinking, but also an emotional perception. The body as a receptive, but often unconscious working perceiving 'tool,' should thus be used to reach or shape an active mind. The body is our device to receive and translate information or mind is a part of it and 'it' is who we are and how we judge the world around us. Also I tend - in terms of speaking about body and mind - to refer to them as separated things, which is a way of thinking in our western society, but isn't our body who and what we are? Maybe there is no separation between mind and body? We are flesh and blood and we feel through and express through our body, the Self, the unity of a thinking body. "Consciously experiencing the body [...] leads to the observation that 'perception' and 'body' are inextricably linked. In addition, the body bears a strong connection to 'presence': because I have a body, I am able to experience myself as being present in the world. (...) The body is the only place from which we are able to observe the outside world" (Groot Nibbelink

6). The body is something subjective, a subjective being that constantly relates and interacts with our environment, with other subjective beings. To position the spectator in the centre of a theatrical experience means to make the theatre a place of social encounters. We don't need a specific activity, like running (even if this also can be useful) to connect an audience and the performance, but should we always keep in mind that we are bodies, that our whole existence is based on our physical presence.

By experiencing the borders of our own body and mind, by becoming aware of their unity and by experiencing their imperfection, we feel lost but also present, "Theatricality (...) has the power both to position us and displace us" (Freedman 1). It can create an understanding for our own failures and those of others. To receive this goal, to become aware of our own presence and our positioning in the world, I want to recall the two theatre makers mentioned in the Prologue, Artaud and Brecht. Emotional immersion combined with a conscious distance.

To describe this, Peter Eversmann uses the terms "non-fiction mode"/empathy and "aesthetic mode"/distance. These modes describe the mental position the spectator adopts or experiences towards a theatrical performance. They relate to how involved the spectator becomes or how critical he/she reflects on the experience. Eversmann claims that both of them are always present at the same time (404). The non-fiction mode, for me, represent Artaud's ideas of the total immersion of the spectators, it appeals to their ability to identify and to project themselves and their own subjectivity into a play. We shall be able to see the theatrical world as a reference to our real world.

The aesthetic mode stands for the Brechtian thinking of the 'Verfremdungseffekt,' breaking the illusion of theatre as a copy of reality and to reveal its mechanics and its secrets. This mode appeals to a more objective/rational

view on a play, to keep a critical distance on things. The underlining point that theatre does not try to copy reality and that it should never be judged as an imitation of reality, but that it is a parallel existing “mode of staging the construction of the real” (Freedman 50) is very important for the spectator to be able to translate the experience into the context of his reality, to what he recognises as true.

An illusion and the experience of something we don't understand directly can help us to open up to new experiences, to listen, to see and to judge again. This experiencing of something we don't understand I call the ‘doubting effect’. This doubting is created by an expectation that remains unfulfilled.

Through the created doubt, the unfulfilled expectation, the spectators might start to question themselves. The performance holds a mirror in front of them and reflects on their behaviour towards the surrounding.

But did the spectators now become the performers?

For me this is to answer with a clear no, grounded on the idea of a choice we made. A performer acts, because he/she decided to be an actor/actress, to embody this role. A spectator chooses to have another role, which will for him/her only change if it is his own intention. The role of a performer is to perform for others and not so much for his/her own self-experience. A spectator mainly goes somewhere to experience something. They would feel, behave and experience something totally different, maybe feel insecure and become defensive, if they feel observed by others.

I want spectators who are able to open up, to be themselves and to be able to create a personal relation to the performance. I think to reach spectators, they have to be addressed somehow in a very sensitive way, to enable them to have an honest look onto themselves. They should not be forced into a defensive position. Thus for

me it is important to keep these roles apart or at least to be very aware of the different motives that lie behind choosing one of these roles.

In my opinion the personal relationship between spectator and performance can be realised in different forms of theatrical spaces, in a box-set stage (one perspective, picture frame space), in a modern theatre (transformable in seating the auditorium and the stage) or on location. With the awareness that while watching a performance the spectators should be able to put themselves in an “aesthetic distance” towards the space and thus can perceive it as a “theatrical one” (Eversmann 410). Of course the choice of the space will still be very important because it has a strong impact on the spectators, but so far I wouldn't exclude any kind of space.

The answer might lie in spectators who feels personally addressed and involved and who are actively joining by thinking and reflecting on the seen, heard, smelled and experienced performance. They want to understand the world and reality around them and its complexity, even if this sometimes can't provide a clear answer. But they don't want to be tricked, they want to be treated with honesty and not like fools.

Our current world presents itself to us as a fast changing image producing machinery in which we have learned to quickly filter out the information we recognize as useful. By focusing on certain effects we can try to reflect on our own behaviour and on the triggers that guide us, we can try to get aware of the unconscious part of us that has such a huge influence on our conscious decisions and to develop an understanding of the world around us. We try to understand the relationship between what we see and how we see it. Through mirroring ourselves and through the mirror of others we might not be able to understand why the world is how it is, but probably we get an insight in why we are how we are and act like we do.